The Challenge of Command
And How to Meet It

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A few years ago, I was asked to address a Reserve Officer Training Corps awards ceremony to honor some of the outstanding men and women who will make up the ranks of the Army's future officer corps.

In considering what I might say to these young leaders, I reflected on my own experience as commander of a light infantry battalion and on the writings of this country's most successful military leaders. I entitled my presentation "Unsolicited Advice to a Leader Going to War" and discussed my observations of what constituted the success of the outstanding junior leaders I had encountered in more than a quarter century of commissioned service.

I offer my candid observations here in the hope that they may prepare today's officers and noncommissioned officers for the awesome responsibility of leading soldiers in combat.

To be a highly successful leader, you must prepare yourself for command. The start point lies with the individual leader. The commander of one mechanized company in the Persian Gulf war noted that his preparation began with the moral and ethical training he had received as a cadet. Central to his belief was his personal credo: "The leader of character in peace is the leader of courage in war." That theme governed his actions throughout the conflict. The way his company operated in the absence of direct supervision of officers, the way his unit treated enemy prisoners, and the way he personally directed his company, all rested on his intent to leave the battlefield with his soldiers and his honor. He soon discovered, not surprisingly, that his company had adopted his credo. The lesson here is that one commander can make an im-

portant difference. So don't sell yourself short.

In addition to personal professional development, you must also have a number of qualities, assuming you have good common sense, have studied your profession, are physically strong, and desire command. (The desire for command is important for today's infantryman. The Army is full of leaders who claim they want to command, but unconsciously or otherwise are unwilling to expend the required energy and effort. What distinguished Marshall, Eisenhower, and Patton from their contemporaries was their collective desire to seek command and their willingness to work toward that goal.)

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Be willing to accept challenges. Like their World War II counterparts, today's leaders face many of the same trials and tribulations as yesterday's heroes. Your willingness to accept the challenges inherent in commanding soldiers will determine your ultimate effectiveness. Soldiers expect officers and noncommissioned officers to lead, and to lead from the front. As a battalion commander, I personally led monthly battalion road marches and payday three-mile runs. I usually joined the candidates for all Expert Infantryman Badge and Air Assault School field marches. My rationale was simple. Not only did I demonstrate to the soldiers my willingness to share their physical and mental hardships, but they saw that I was interested in what they were doing and was physically capable of traversing the same terrain over which I ordered them to march. The more senior the commander, the more important it is for soldiers to see him in the field.

Be willing to make difficult decisions. This is the essential quality that distinguishes a good leader from a good commander. It is easy to decide what a unit will do from one day to another. Any leader can do that, for his decisions are directed to a body of men, and in effect are somewhat impersonal. But the focus of a commander's decision is the individual as well as the unit. It is decidedly more difficult to deny an individual soldier's request to miss a specific field exercise, or quite possibly a deployment, in order to conduct personal business or handle a problem in his family than it is to order an entire unit to the field for training.

Let me give an example of this difference from my own command experience. One of the toughest decisions I made during my command tour was the relief-for-cause of one of my most outstanding platoon sergeants. The conflict revolved around the classic "mission versus men" debate that has plagued many a leader. This particular event occurred during the fifth day of an extended field training exercise when companies were conducting relief-in-place operations. It had rained torrents for four consecutive days and showed little sign of stopping. As I inspected the defensive positions, I noted that one M60 machinegun position was unoccupied. A young soldier, shivering from the freezing rain, stood idly by with his M60 at his side. Calling the platoon sergeant, who was also the acting platoon leader, to the vacant position, I asked why he had failed to place a team to cover the enemy's main avenue of approach into the company sector.

Responding that he was concerned about the welfare of the platoon and there was water in the bottom of the fighting position, he had decided not to occupy the position, but to "simulate" the crew-served weapon position. Further inquiry confirmed that neither the platoon sergeant nor the gunner had actually stood in the position. I jumped into the crew-served weapon position to determine the depth of the water and ascertain the fields of fire and discovered the water was only a few inches deep. Turning my attention to the machinegunner, I instructed him to put a sandbag in the hole so he could stay dry and then to check his assigned sector to ensure that he still covered the prescribed fields of fire.

Returning to the platoon sergeant, I reiterated my standards for defensive fighting positions and asked point blank if he was willing to meet those standards. When he responded, "No sir, not if your standards require me to put soldiers in fighting positions filled with water," I relieved him on the spot and assigned command of the platoon to the senior squad leader. I did not relieve the platoon sergeant for *failing* to meet the battalion standard, but for *refusing* to meet the standard, and his subsequent efficiency report reflected this distinction.

In my opinion, his action jeopardized not only the lives of his platoon but the company as well. Needless to say, my decision was not popular with the NCOs in the company. The unit first sergeant and the remorseful platoon sergeant later requested that I reconsider my decision. I realized that the platoon sergeant had been under a great deal of stress, but a vacated M60 position could have resulted in the death of the entire platoon, and no individual—officer or noncommissioned officer, regardless of his personal popularity—should be permitted to endanger the lives of our soldiers. Wars are not won on sentiment. The decision stood.

Be optimistic. Optimism breeds self-confidence. When conditions are difficult, the command is depressed, and everyone seems critical and pessimistic, you must be especially cheerful and optimistic. In writing his memoirs, Eisenhower remarked that optimism and pessimism are infectious and they spread more rapidly from the head downward than in any other direction. A commander's optimism has the most extraordinary effect upon all with whom he comes in contact. With that realization, Eisenhower firmly determined that his mannerisms and speech in public

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would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory—that any pessimism and discouragement he might feel would be reserved for the privacy of his tent.

Military theorist J.F.C. Fuller and George S. Patton expressed similar sentiments. Fuller said a sense of humor was the lubricant of a good battalion. According to Patton, self-confidence was the twin brother of leadership. Look at the way the Third Army responded to him during the Normandy breakout and the Ardennes campaign. Patton exuded optimism and confidence and was thus able to inspire his men with confidence and earn their trust. Who else could have taken an army from a mid-winter drive, turned it 90 degrees to the north, and then vigorously counterattacked to relieve the embattled garrison at Bastogne? His soldiers went into battle knowing that they would be victorious so long as Patton was in command.

The same optimism is still necessary today. During a company exercise using MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system), I once overheard a soldier tell a fellow platoon member that he was glad he was in first squad because his squad leader always placed first in every platoon competition. That soldier was confident that his unit would emerge victorious. And that squad leader had the same effect on his men that Patton and Eisenhower had on the armies in northwest Europe.

It is especially important to remain optimistic when you make mistakes personally. Every leader I have known has made his share of mistakes in the field (I have made more than my share), and you will do the same. Don't let it get you down. Learn from those mistakes and drive on.

Be selfless. Selflessness, rather than selfishness, is the fourth prerequisite for successful command. Marshall once noted that when evening comes and all are exhausted, hungry, and possibly dispirited—particularly in unfavorable weather at the end of a march or in battle—you must put aside any thought of personal fatigue and display marked energy in looking after the comfort of your organization, inspecting your lines, and preparing for tomorrow. Commanders are not supermen. They get just as tired, just as thirsty, and just as distraught as their soldiers. But a commander has an obligation to the men he leads to provide for their welfare and prepare them for combat.

On arriving at a new location, the commander must ensure that his men are prepared for the evening's battle. Once the fighting positions are ready and the company is on reduced alert, the commander must make the final inspection of the line, questioning machinegunners and individual riflemen on their sectors of fire. Have warning orders and fragmentary orders been issued for subsequent operations? Have you forgotten anything? A commander's work is truly never complete.

Following a particularly difficult 18-mile field march over some of the most treacherous terrain on Oahu, I once saw a first sergeant walk his entire company line, instructing squad leaders to inspect the soldiers' feet, forcing soldiers to consume water, and ordering platoon medics to check each and every soldier in the command. He then personally inspected each of his platoon sergeants. Only after he had supervised the accomplishment of these tasks did he take the boots off his own blistered feet and apply medication. That first sergeant was a soldiers' soldier.

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Be loyal. All successful commanders possess the virtue of loyalty. Make a point of extreme loyalty, in thought and deed, to your senior leaders personally; and in your efforts to carry out their plans or policies, the less you approve, the more energy you must direct to the task. You frequently hear leaders complain about decisions of superior officers. Why is the captain making us go to the field on a weekend? Why does our first sergeant make us do more sit-ups than Bravo Company's first sergeant? Soldiers have a right to grumble; officers and noncommissioned officers do not.

Loyalty, however, is a two-way street. Loyalty is also important down the chain of command—to soldiers and junior leaders entrusted to your care. Far too frequently, general and flag officers are only too willing to share in a subordinate unit's achievement when the results make the senior organization look good, then immediately look for scapegoats when junior leaders make mistakes.

Instead of relieving subordinate leaders or penalizing them on an evaluation report, take the time to counsel them in a constructive manner. Allow junior leaders to grow. If the Army learned anything from the 1970s, it is that a "zero defects" force is detrimental to the morale and efficiency of the Army as a professional fighting force. If the offense occurs a second time, that is a different matter.

I generally found it beneficial to cite outstanding performances by soldiers and junior leaders in my dispatches to senior headquarters. When my battalion became the first in the 25th Infantry Division to reenlist 100 soldiers in six-month period, the people whose names went forward to the commanding general were not the battalion and company commanders but the company reenlistment NCOs. They did the work, not the officers. When the 100th first-termer signed his papers, I asked the division public affairs officer to do a story on him and his company. To the soldier's delight, his photograph appeared in the next edition of the division newspaper. We followed a similar practice when the battalion led the others three years in a row for the most Expert Field Medical Badge recipients. The names recognized in the newspaper were those of the physician's assistant and the medical platoon sergeant, as well as each recipient.

The most successful commanders are those who do not worry about who gets

the credit. Eisenhower put it best: "Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned by the blood of his followers and the sacrifices of his friends." Consequently, recognition of a soldier in front of his comrades should always be foremost in a commander's mind. Pin that Expert Infantryman Badge on a private's chest following the successful completion of a final road march. Orders and formal ceremonies can follow.

One final recommendation on the recognition of soldiers. Although many commanders will disagree, I suggest you be generous with letters of commendation and medals that you are empowered to bestow. A handwritten note by a commander on the occasion of a promotion or graduation from a school is a treasured memento for a young soldier. I noticed while conducting an unannounced inspection one morning that several soldiers had taped some of my notes inside their wall lockers.

With respect to medals, establish a policy and be consistent. An Army Achievement Medal is not the Medal of Honor. Be generous if a young infantryman meets your standard. And remember the junior noncommissioned officers and the commissioned officers too.

Remain calm. Battle by its nature is chaotic. Your responsibility as a commander is to keep this chaos from becoming worse than it already is. The more alarming the reports received or the conditions viewed in battle, the more determined must be your attitude. Granted, bad news never improves with time, but initial reports are generally far more disquieting than the reality. As a rule, if you look down the track and see ten troubles approaching you, nine of them will derail before they reach you, and you can generally handle the tenth with little effort.

I once received three reports during a 20-minute period of a field exercise in which my battalion served as the opposing force to five Army and Marine corps infantry battalions on the Hawaiian islands of Oahu and Molokai. Shortly after noon on D-Day, I received a tactical satellite message that one of my companies had been surrounded and compelled to surrender to a numerically superior force. Ten minutes later, the scout platoon reported that the air was filled with UH-60 aircraft and that at least three battalions were conducting a brigade size air assault not far from our forward positions. Within minutes, another commander called to inform me that enemy scouts were marking lanes for a subsequent amphibious landing. And, by the way, one of the soldiers had "misplaced" his protective mask. All this on the first day of the exercise.

The situation soon clarified. It was not my company that was surrounded but my company that had surrounded the enemy. True, the enemy had air assaulted north of our primary positions but on landing zones where we had concentrated planned artillery fires. My company commander on the beach reported later in the evening that the enemy scouts had determined that the beach defenses were too formidable and an enemy air assault was aborted due to defensive obstacles and superior firepower. And yes, under the direction of his squad leader, the soldier found his protective mask.

The list of characteristics could continue, but I remain convinced that the average commander who scrupulously follows this course of action is bound to succeed in battle. Marshall noted that few commanders he encountered during the Great War seemed equal to it, but he believed this was due to their failure to realize the importance of so governing their course.

As a commander in today's Army, your greatest challenge is to realize the importance of command and to be willing to make the necessary sacrifices. The Army's future is in your hands. Make the most of it.

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